

I Want to Call Out to Samirah

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No. I'm not dead. And I'm not going to die. I'm sure I'm not going to die. Because I'm still thinking. My brain is working. So I'm OK. And now the pain has even receded to the point where I can hardly feel it. I'm fine. I'm just a bit dizzy, and extremely tired. And I'm a little cold. But it's that comfortable kind of cold, the kind you feel when you're running a fever, climb into bed and snuggle up under the covers, hugging yourself, with your thighs against your chest and your lips stuck to your knees. And now I'm trying to lift my legs, but even as I imagine them pressing against my chest, nothing has moved. I try again, for the millionth time, to open my eyes, but I can't. Or maybe they're open but I see only darkness. Could I possibly have gone blind? No. How can that be? And I'm going through everything all over again, because it's all very clear. Up until the moment it happened. My brain's working perfectly, as perfectly as before. And to prove it to myself I'll work out my usual maths test. The famous four out of six. One goes and leaves two. So that makes it four and two sixths... four and one third. Right? There's nothing wrong with my brain. And that was evident even before I did my maths test because I can remember everything. Like my name. My mother's and my brother's. Our home address. My telephone number, the VKJ 382 on my license plate, Samirah's address, the way to her house. I can see The Three Lions bar, after which you take a right turn and enter her street. I remember my car, driven by Samirah. The music of Ali Farka Touré blaring out of the speakers in the boot. The blinding light of that

huge truck, coming straight at us. The car mounting the pavement. Samirah's scream. The fence erupting, the clatter and jolt of the smash. That's it. And then here. In this comfortable cold, this strange dizziness, this lethargic heaviness.

So if I can remember everything, how come I cannot see, hear or smell a thing? And why can't I speak? I open my mouth but nothing comes out. Maybe I'm not even breathing. Could I be dead? No. I can't be. And Samirah? Where did they take Samirah? I want to call out to Samirah. Was she injured? She must have been, at least a little. But she can't be dead! No, no, that's impossible. I pray to God she's not badly hurt. No, Lord. Not Samirah. Not now. No.

I feel like I'm falling asleep but I don't want to sleep. Because if I fall asleep I might not wake up. And I can remember a film, where someone was calling to someone not to fall asleep. I can't remember which film. Or maybe it was a book. He kept telling him, "Don't fall asleep, don't fall asleep," because he was afraid that if he let him sleep he'd never wake again. But – wait – where am I? In a hospital? But then wouldn't I hear some noise? Like doctors and nurses talking or moving about, or the noise of stretchers being pushed along the corridors, or the bell of the arriving lift, the ringing of a phone, the sound of a wheelchair, or at least of doors opening and closing?

Where am I?

No, I won't fall asleep. No matter what. I don't want to sleep. I'm trying to remember what Samirah was saying before all this

happened. Probably some story about her family. Yes, she was telling me about her cousin Rashidah, who had invited her to their house for the feast of Eid. And Samirah wanted to take me with her so I would see where she came from. Yes. She was telling me something about Rashidah. But I can't remember exactly what. Because by then we were already blinded by the lights of the oncoming truck. I wonder what she was going to tell me. As soon as I see her, I'll remind her and she'll tell me all about it. Because I'm sure everything is going to be fine. I'll be by her side in no time, and we'll pick up where we left off. Or maybe I'll wait till we're together in bed. With her back pressing against my chest, like two spoons, and our feet locked together, like a battery slipping exactly into place. That's how I love to listen to Samirah's stories. And now I'm thinking about our last night together, when I told her I'd like to visit her country and to meet the cousins she talks about so much. I want to see how they celebrate their Eid. To relive a tiny bit of her countless stories. Like the one when she wore a flowered dress, and they went to her uncle's courtyard, where the men had killed a sheep, and they prepared the meal. I'm trying to remember the cousins' names. Ahmed. Fatime. Jihan. Zahra. The cousins with whom she used to go to her grandparents for a little pocket money. And about the games they would play in her uncle's courtyard, surrounded by olive trees. There, with the smell of dinner as it cooked, they'd play and run after each other. And how they would paint one henna after another on the palm of their hand. "Ah, the fun we used to have!" I hear her telling me, in her tender, gracious voice, just like her, with her hands holding mine around her chest. One day she will paint henna on my palm too, with flowers of all sizes.

I had told her about our Easter, our Easter cakes, and Easter meal, and the Pope's blessing, and how everyone would stop chewing so as not to miss any of his ten words in Maltese. And there she laughed, the laugh I loved so much. Her mushroom giggle! Because the first time I heard it was just after we had finished eating a mushroom pizza. And the Good Friday procession, and the seven visits, and the washing of the feet. The Resurrection, and the tradition of running at full speed with the statue. And she listens attentively, hoping that the following Easter she'd experience all this with me. And later she would tell her mother all about it.

And that leads me to think of Rida – her mother – and how I had never expected her to be so nice. Of the first night I slept at their house. Of the second and the third. Of six months later. Of the time when Samirah and I helped her make *pastille*, and of the long chat we had when we'd finished the pie and Samirah went to do the dishes. That day when I told Rida that my mother wasn't very happy about me dating Samirah. And Rida told me how religion, sometimes, has a habit of driving people apart, instead of bringing them together. And that it shouldn't be that way, because all religions are about one thing – love. She had told me something that I wanted to remember so much so I could say it to my mother, but I can't remember it now. But I do remember how she had squeezed my hand that night – as if I were hers – telling me not to give up because nothing changes more quickly than people and the way they think. And I can hear my mother's voice. "Marry anyone you like, a Japanese, Russian, gypsy, but not a Muslim." And how I tried to tell her that what she was saying just didn't make sense. I had never expected it of her, because in

all my life I had never known her to lack good judgment. She had always been much smarter than other women of her age. But when it came to Samirah she disappointed me big time. How can anyone think that being a Muslim meant being dirty? Or that they wore layers of clothes one upon the other? Or that they swam wrapped up in a sack? Or that Muslims cooked in the bedroom? How could she possibly think like that? How could I have been so wrong about my mother? At school I used to be so proud of her, because compared to the other mums, she was amazing. Because while others used to leave the Jehovah's witnesses outside or drive them away, my mother would throw them a little party. Later she asked me about Samirah's father. When I told her that she didn't know him, I saw in the expression of her face that she had got her answer, the answer she had been looking for. And I felt like asking her about my own father, but for once I held back.

Another time I had shown her some pictures of Samirah. Some of when she was still a child, taken during Eid. And there's one where she's taller than all the cousins, with her huge, black eyes. She was wearing a jellaba, which someone had made her especially for the occasion. She was the most beautiful on that day and everyone had said she looked like Barbie and called her "Barbie Jellaba". But my mother didn't think she looked like Barbie. She only said one word. *Interesting*. And she left to take down the laundry, knowing that with one word she had pronounced a thousand, each of them a double-edged sword. And when I gave a hint of this to Samirah, she understood everything right away, and never said a word against my mum. Every time she saw me getting angry, she would calm me down. I wonder what my mother would say if she were to find out that it was Samirah

who chose and bought her my Christmas present, after a whole week looking for it up and down the city.

If I let myself go, I'll fall asleep. But I don't want to sleep. I want to stay awake until I can hear a noise, any noise. Until I open my eyes and see where I am. Perhaps I'm next to Samirah and I don't even know. Maybe Samirah is by my side, saying "Don't sleep, don't sleep." And there's no way I'm going to disappoint Samirah.

Sometimes I wish I had been born in Samirah's country. Ideally on the streets close to hers. Somewhere between the large bamboo curtain shop and the tea shop, where, Samirah says, her uncle spent most of his life solving the world's problems. Perhaps we would have played together as children. Things would have been so much easier for us. And at Eid we would all have gone to theirs, to her uncle's courtyard, or they could have come to ours.

Time is passing by and still no sound. I want to hear Samirah's voice. And feel her hands on my face... her gentle fingers on my lips... her smell... The pain seems to be returning, I'm starting to become confused. The void around me squeezes me from all sides. Like a boy blindfolded and thrown into the middle of a mischievous mob. I recall a similar game we used to play as children. But I don't remember blindfolding the boy in the middle, so I can't understand why he never had any idea who was pushing him around.

I'm tired. I know that if I relax, if I stop thinking, I'll fall asleep. And I don't want to sleep. Because if Samirah comes while I'm asleep she won't wake me. And now I've made up my mind that, as soon as I see Samirah, the first thing I'll do is tell her that I love her. Then I'll tell her that she did nothing wrong. That tonight the fault was mine as much as hers, that actually

it was the truck driver's fault, blinding us with his bright lights. And that I shouldn't have let her drive. And the car, whatever's left of it, is not important. The important thing is that we're both safe and sound. I'll tell her again that I love her, and that, no, I could never imagine life without her. And one day when we have children, we'll take them to her country, for the feast of Eid, so that they too will go to her uncle's courtyard, and run and play with Amal, Farid and Habib, in that joyous cacophony which, sometimes, in the peaceful quiet of the car on Sundays, she misses so much.

But we must have been hurt. Both of us. And we were brought to this hospital. Maybe we lost consciousness with the smash. We must have been taken out of the car and brought here. They put me in one place, and Samirah in another. Or maybe we're side by side but neither of us knows it. Just the thought that Samirah may be lying close to me makes me excited; I'm trying to will my hand out from under the blanket, stretching it out to touch Samirah, and when I think that I'm actually touching something, I realise that my hand is still lying where it was, under the blanket.

And I'm thinking that if we're in hospital, then they must have called home. They must have found my ID in my wallet, or something in Samirah's bag. Or maybe they found my mobile, and all they had to do was to dial "mum". And if they called both of them, then probably they're both out there right now, waiting to see us. My mother on one side, hers on the other. I wonder if they'll recognize each other. Whether they'll realise who's mum the other is. Will they be alone? Or will the emergency room be full of people even at this hour? I feel as if I'm about to fall asleep. There's this terrible weight, pressing on me.

And now there's a doctor, one of many working here, and he's calling them by their name.

"Mrs Vella? Mrs Azzi?"

And they fly off their chairs, look at each other and move closer to the doctor. He's telling them what happened. He asks them to wait and goes back inside. And the two women, woken by a chilling telephone call in the middle of the night, sit back down on their chairs. They're both crying and looking at each other with haunted eyes. The one closest to the door gets up and moves closer to the other woman, who's sitting beneath a notice board full of posters about the effect of drugs and about pregnancy. The other woman begins to weep more intensely, and the woman wearing an abayah holds her hand. And now they're crying together. They both pray fervently for those they love so dearly not to be taken away from them. Not yet. No.

"To think we had to meet here," the woman dressed in black is saying, as she wipes her nose with a wet tissue.

"Who would have imagined it?" the other replies, her eyes blood red and her hands shaking.

"Who would have imagined it?"

"I've been wanting to meet you for a long time."

Then nothing. After a while, the woman continues. "I've heard many nice things about you."

"About you too."

Then nothing again. Two hearts beating the same hope. "How happy they were together!"

"They are, they are."

And they both stare at the reflection of the light on the floor tiles, unable to believe where they are.

"He loves you very much, you know? He talks about you often."

Time passes. The other woman remains silent, then speaks, "Lately he was staying at your house more than at mine."

"It's my pleasure. He's a good boy and easy to love."

"Your daughter too, from what he says."

"Samirah loves him. I never saw her so happy."

"I don't remember him so happy either."

And with those words, she breaks into

tears again, and the other woman puts her arms around her and comforts her. And they both close their eyes and give a silent prayer. And now the door opens again, and the doctor comes out, his face pale and drawn. They stand up.

"Would you care to follow me? I'd like to talk to you."

And again they hold hands, squeezing them tightly, and follow him. And I see them, hand in hand, entering the doctor's office – and now I really want to call out to Samirah.